WELCOME THE CHILD

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Mark 9: 35-37; 10: 13-16

Do you ever find yourself feeling grateful that you have your growing up years behind you? That you made it safely through the perils and dangers of childhood and adolescence? Do you ever experience gratitude that you don't have to contend with the very specific and oftentimes lethal dangers which our youngsters confront every day of their lives?

I saw one of my oldest friends recently, a man I have know for nearly all my life. Our children are all grown and we were talking about how different their lives are from our own. In the course of the conversation, something came into focus for me that I hadn't thought of before and which we all had trouble believing, even though it was true about all of us. It was possible, I said, to grow up and graduate from high school in a small central Pennsylvania town without ever once encountering alcohol. It was such an astounding suggestion that it took us all a while to assimilate but we agreed it was true. Some people were drinking at parties but not much. Most were not. Drugs were the stuff of remote myth. We never even saw any. Our only contact with addictive chemicals sound like a *Leave it to Beaver* incident, a stolen pack of Chesterfields

taken into the woods, distributed carefully and smoked with great determination and sophistication, one after the other, until they were gone. I don't recall that we ever needed to do it a second time.

Someone recently compiled a list comparing the top discipline and behavior problems occurring in the California public schools in 1940 and then in 1990.

<u>The 1940's list:</u>

- **Talking**
- **Chewing gum**
- **Making noise**
- **Running in the halls**
- **Getting out of turn in line**

- **Wearing improper clothing**
- **Not putting paper in wastebaskets**

The 1990’s List

- Drug and Alcohol abuse
- Pregnancy
- Rape
- Robbery, assault and burglary
- Arson
- Vandalism
- Gang warfare
- Abortion
- Venereal disease

You might conclude that never in history have childhood and adolescence been so treacherous as they are today and there is a sense in which that is true. On the other hand, 2,000 years ago in the Mediterranean world many infants never even made it to childhood because their parents simply abandoned them as newborns.

One time Jesus confronted and challenged that ethos and that brutal custom in a most dramatic way. He and his small band of friends were on their way walking from town to town in Galilee. He was teaching in synagogues, healing the sick, encouraging the depressed and including into his own circle of association many of the people who were on the margins of his own society and his own religion. It was that inclusivity—his reaching across the societal and religious boundaries to affirm and include and, most

provocatively, to eat with, the unclean, the sinners—that perplexed, distressed and then angered the guardians of public order and morality. They were beginning to follow him around, asking him difficult questions of morality and the law, trying to trip him up, discredit him, maybe even provoke him to say something blasphemous or seditious which could result in his arrest and crucifixion.

Now they were on the road again, back to Capernaum where Peter lived and Jesus apparently had a house, a home base. On the way, they argued. He could hear them, apparently. When they arrived, he asked, “What were you arguing about?” They were silent. They were embarrassed. He had been talking about the very real possibility of suffering, about self denial, about giving your life away and they were arguing about who among them was

the greatest. It is one of the most human and most comic incidents in the whole story. He's talking about self denial and sacrifice and they're arguing about who's number one. And so, again, he sits down and uses the moment to teach. "The one among you who wants to be first must be the servant of all."

We've heard it a thousand times but it was, at the time, a stunning reversal of values. But then a strange thing happens. Jesus, I think, is distracted and changes the subject. He sees a child. I don't know how old the child was, but in my imagination I see a two-year old, a toddler, that absolutely delightful age when children are never more beautiful, able to toddle about, reaching out to touch and feel and examine everything, willing to stop whatever they are doing and gaze intently, willing almost always to smile. You can't resist waving or smiling or patting. I see a two

year old escapee from his mother, trundling through this very serious, very adult occasion, a group of men standing around, shuffling their feet, heads down, obviously feeling some discomfort and embarrassment, and in their midst, a man seated, looking at them intently, talking to them—all very serious adult business. And right through the middle of it all comes a toddler. The one teaching stops, maybe smiles, maybe greets the child and everything is now different. The subject changes. He pickes the child up and says, “Whoever welcomes one such little one welcomes me.”

The very next day something similar happens.

The Pharisees have been at him for days. Crowds of people are now following him—sick people, blind people, people are carrying

their aged and infirm—asking for healing, restoration, a touch of his hand. And now the men from Jerusalem—challenging, accusing.

“Why are you eating with sinners? Why are you ignoring the Sabbath laws/ Why are you associating with unclean women and men? And what about the law? Tell us, teacher, is it lawful to divorce? . . .” it’s a truth squad from headquarters, smart, clever men on a mission to discredit him, perhaps even get him to implicate himself with heresy, blasphemy, treason even.

And at just this minute here come some parents barging in with their children, their babies. They want him to touch them. It a wonderfully human moment.

But the disciples see it coming and try to stop the parents. “Can’t you see that he’s busy?” They speak sternly, impatiently, “Come back some other time.”

And Jesus sees it and becomes indignant, not with the parents, not with their babies, not even with the Pharisees, but with his own disciples. They don’t understand. The children are the point. They are far more important than the disciples’ dispute about prestige and power; far more important than the Pharisees’ truth and ____campaign. They are, in fact, pretty much more important than anything. So he says, “Let them come. The Kingdom belongs to them.” And I see him sweeping his gaze over all of them—the sick, elderly, crippled and blind; the proud Pharisees, the harried, hastled disciples. “You have to receive the kingdom as if you were a child.” And then, deliberately, quietly, lovingly,

with the power and authority and love of Almighty God in him, “he took them in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them.”

Most of the commentators help us to understand that by receiving the children, touching the children, taking the children in his arms, he was acting deliberately, provocatively and in a way that also quietly expressed his revolutionary notion of God’s kingdom. It helps, the commentators say, to understand a little of the cultural context.

Jewish culture valued children very highly. But the wider Greek-Roman culture in which Jewish culture lived often did not. John Dominic Crossan explains that there was a brutal and widespread custom in the Mediterranean world of “casting out,” abandoning infants who were unwanted. You simply put the baby out and it

died of exposure, or someone picked it up, raised it to be sold as a slave. In fact, Crossan says it was fairly widespread and it was based on the common assumption that a child was a non-entity, a non-person until its father accepted it as a member of the tribe or clan. If the father wanted a son, he simply didn't touch his daughter and she would be abandoned. Crossan even cites a letter written one year before the birth of Jesus from an Egyptian worker to his wife who was about to give birth. It's a chatty, loving letter and at the end the writer says, "If by chance you bear a son, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out. (*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,* p.62-63)

As the early Christian church moved into the Gentile cities of that world one of its distinguishing characteristics was the way it responded to this custom. Christians picked up the discarded

babies. The idea of adoption—the later idea of orphanages for abandoned, abused or unwanted children—were Christian ideas, a Christian gift to the world.

In that environment and that world, what Jesus did by welcoming the child was dramatic, revolutionary. Crossan says that the act of touching, cradling, scooping that two-year-old toddler up into his strong arms and holding her—surely it was a little girl, just to punctuate the point—that act, Crossan says, was “the official bodily action of a father designating a newly-born infant for life rather than death, for accepting it into his family rather than casting it out into the garbage.”

There is in this country a curious irony when it comes to children. The curious thing about American culture, *Time Magazine*

observed in a special cover artile, is that Americans cherish the *notion* that they cherish children more than they cherish their children (10/8/90, “Suffer the Children,” a cover article)

The plight of nineteen Chicago children, abandoned in a cold and filthy apartment, sharing a few scraps of food with a dog, touched hearts all the way to Washington. But there was a part of that story that made me wonder and then made me angry. If I read it correctly, those children were not only abandoned by parents, they had been expelled from school because they had not received the required inoculations. School attendance—or school absence—under other circumstances might have alerted somebody to the tragedy. But the children weren’t in school because they weren’t inoculated. Parents fault? Of course. They were too busy doing drugs. But is it necessary to put children at

risk because parents don’t act responsibly? Is there not a way to inoculate our children if the parents are negligent? Of course there is. But we don’t like to pay for it.

I know a young man who decided to give a year after college to teaching in a school where needs are real and urgent. He chose New York City, the South Bronx, a junior high school. There was no art, no music, no drama, no counselors. He was also the track coach. There was no gym, no athletic field, no track. It’s too dangerous to stay after school and anyhow the custodians all go home exactly at three o’clock. So track practice was at lunch hour, in the street, and his job was primarily to sweep the broken glass away so the youngsters could run.

Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund, is a passionate but seasoned advocate fro children in our society. Our inattentiveness to their welfare poses the greatest simple threat to our nation's future, she argues.

"What is wrong with us," she asks, "when the morally unthinkable has become normal?" In the next four years:

- 1,000,000 babies will be born at low birth weight
- 143,000 will die before their first birthday
- 15,800 children under 19 will die by firearms
- 135,000 American youngsters take a gun to school every day.

We live beside and within it and it happens almost every day . . . 14 times a day in America, a classroom of children killed every two

days. It happens every few days in Chicago. Last Saturday, Metro Section, *Chicago Tribune,* Maurice Young, 16 months old, pushed by his mother in his stroller, on the way to the grocery store at Chicago and Lawndale, caught in gang crossfire, dead with a bullet in his chest. Gun deaths are actually down a little this year, but they are still quite unlike anything anywhere else in the world.

And still we refuse to do much about it. It is, everyone agrees, a combination of factors over which we do have some control. Availability of hand guns, automatic weapons, accessibility of drugs and the absence of jobs, which makes the drug trade a lucrative entrepreneurial option for many city young people and provides the economic superstructure for gang culture.

Marian writes:

“One out of every five children in America is poor. If you are a preschooler, the odds are worse; one out of four is poor. One out of every three black or brown children is poor. Things happen to children every day in America that don’t happen elsewhere . . . A child growing up in America is fifteen times likely to be killed by gunfire as a child growing up in Northern Ireland. (*Chicago Tribune,* 1/23/94)

One of the uncomfortable undercurrents of the whole Elian Gonzales affair is that little Elian would be much less likely to be shot at school in Cuba than in the U. S.—and much more likely to learn to read.

A few years ago the National Council of Catholic Bishops issued a report, “Putting Children and Families First,” which cited the unfortunate and unnecessary polarization in our thinking on this issue, as if it were a matter of either strong, autonomous families or government programs. The fact is, it is both. The fact is public policy either helps or hinders the maintenance of strong families. The fact is we know measures to take to give children a better chance and their families the opportunity to sustain them. Winston Churchill said, “There is no finer investment for any country than putting milk into babies.” We know that one dollar invested in prenatal care for a poor mother results in a savings of three dollars later. We know that immunization prevents disease, that routine preventive medical care and basic nutrition have a dramatic effect not only in the physical health of children but also their mental capacity. We know that Head Start works—but still—

it touches not even one half the children who need it or are eligible for it.

In a fine essay in the New York Times Magazine a few weeks ago, Sara Mosle analyzes the current politically fashionable position that government spending is not the answer to the dilemma of children in our culture. Churches and non-profits and individuals can and will do the job better, more efficiently and more economically.

Ms. Mosle has done her part, mentoring a group of adolescents—from 164th Street in upper Manhattan—for several years, investing lost of time and love and money.

She observes: “For all the talk about children in this county, we do very little for them—or their families. What my kids really need I can’t give them: better housing, less crowded schools, access to affordable health care, a less punitive juvenile justice system and for their parents, better childcare and a living wage.” (*New York Times* Sunday Magazine, 7/2/2000)

What we need is the will, the heart, the spiritual courage. Could we do it—save two generations of children? Of course we can do it. We came up with $115 billion a few years ago to bail out the savings and loan industry.

We’re so flush at the moment our representatives are falling all over each other to create tax breaks for their wealthiest constituents.

We know some answers, by the way. *Time Magazine* said that any economist can prove that spending on children is a bargain. One dollar spent for prenatal care for pregnant women saves three dollars in individual care during the first year of the infant's life; ten dollars down the road. We can provide nine months of free drug treatment to a pregnant woman who is addicted for $5,000, or we can pay $30,000 to care for the addicted baby she will bear, for twenty days.

We know what works. Education works. Good schools work: not exclusively in terms of test scores—that may take a while—but in terms of alternatives to drugs and crime.

We know what works. Head Start works. The economists say that one dollar spent on high quality preschool education saves an estimated $7.16 in later special education, crime, welfare and other costs. Yet, despite its cost effectiveness and profound impact, Head Start has never received enough funding to allow more than thirty-five percent of eligible children to attend.

Now this becomes fairly uncomfortable because we cherish the notion that we cherish the children. We Christians need to recall that day when our Lord undercut and subverted the mores and customs of his world by welcoming, by giving life to, by blessing the children. We sentimentalize the scene. It helped get him executed. It struck so deeply at the heart of the way his world acted that the authorities properly and accurately judged him a threat to the status quo and executed him.

It is not an inappropriate meddling in politics; it is an act of Christian faithfulness when we simply refuse to tolerate federal, state and local budgets for education and children's programs that are more of the same old thing.

Jesus became indignant when his disciples prevented the children from coming to him. So I believe his followers could afford a little indignation on this issue, a little obnoxious advocacy for children, a little smart and tough political activism on behalf of the nuisances and nobodies who, we have on good authority, are already in the Kingdom of God.

"If the child is safe, everyone is safe," someone wrote. Jesus picked up the child and held her in his arms and in that eloquent

gesture conveyed the wonderfully inclusive and unconditional love of God. Children need to know that they are loved unconditionally.

The loss of a parent is so very painful, regardless of our age because is is the loss, for many, of a source of unconditional love. Among the most precious blessings of my life was a father who never gave up, who worked hard, supported his family without fanfare, and a mother who stood beside him, an equal partner in making a home. They let me know about unconditional love. Even if that is not your experience, you know the importance and blessing of that miracle of grace.

And that is what Jesus, I think, meant to convey. The children are loved by him even though they have done nothing to earn his love. The children are loved unconditionally and so are we.

They needed to hear that. The people around him were working so hard at their religion—the scribes and Pharisees—making sure that the rules were all obeyed and that everyone knew his or her place. And the disciples were working so hard at the things adult work at—getting ahead, succeeding, being number one. Jesus himself is in the middle of teaching an important lesson and in the middle of it all comes a child and he stops, picks up the child and teaches the most important lesson of all, says the word we most need to hear, a word which is the good news, the redeeming, saving word of God's unconditional love.

In Morris West's novel, *The Clowns of God* , West portrays the return of Christ in which he holds a Down Syndrome child, serving her the bread and wine of communion, saying,
"I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you—eternal innocence. She will never offend me as all of you have done. She will never pervert or destroy the works of my father's hands. She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human. She will remind you every day that "I AM WHO I AM." (Diane M. Komp, *Theology Today,* "Hearts Untroubled," Vol. 45, p. 273-279)

Amen.

Dear God, we thank you for the reminder that all children are your gift to us and that you have given us all the responsibility for their

protection and care. And we thank you for the reminder of your love for each of us and that there is nothing we can do and nothing that can happen to us that can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen